

Journal of a Pandemic

4 March to 8 April 2020, New York City

By Anne Summers

On March 4 I attended a small birthday party for a friend at Via Carota, a wildly popular Italian restaurant in Grove Street in the Village. Our party of 12 hovered in the crowded bar area, sipping Negronis, waiting for our table. We had already begun a form of social distancing, although we were not yet calling it this. I had not embraced David, a very old Australian friend who has lived in the US for more than 40 years, whose birthday it was. I had greeted everyone with a slightly self-conscious namaste. Everyone had laughed, but no one offered a hand.

I found myself seated next to Peter who is a doctor. He is in charge of Mt Sinai Brooklyn a moderate sized hospital of 220 beds in east Brooklyn that serves a low-income and racially and ethnically diverse community. We talked about his arduous daily commute, from Chelsea in Manhattan where he shares an apartment with his husband and their 13-year-old son, which takes about 90 minutes. He takes the F train to the Kings Highway station and from there rides a bike he manages to stow somewhere the two miles to the hospital. We talked about a few medical issues, the way you do when you find yourself sitting next to a clinician, but I don't think we even mentioned the coronavirus. After all, only two cases had been identified in New York City. Nothing like Italy, or China.

Thursday March 5

New York City Confirmed Cases: 4

This morning I went over to Williamsburg, a Brooklyn neighbourhood that adjoins Dumbo where I live but which takes an absurdly long time to reach by bus, partly because of the extremely circuitous route that must have been designed by a local politician. But it's an interesting journey, especially travelling through South Williamsburg which is home to a very large ultra-Orthodox Satmar Hasidic Jewish community. The narrow streets are crowded with men in all-black traditional garb waiting for buses or walking, presumably to wherever they work. It's early so there are only a few women around, but I've been here before so know that later in the day large numbers of women will be out and about, all young, all wearing sheitels, the traditional wig required of observant women, and all pushing baby carriages. There was a major measles outbreak in this neighbourhood a year ago. Now another public health threat is upon us, one that seems likely to impact more widely around the city.

I was in Williamsburg to have coffee with my long-standing Australian friends Gary and Mez O'Neill who are in New York for a few days, the first leg of a long-anticipated round-the-world holiday. They scoff when I decline to hug them, but I notice that Mez is carrying hand sanitiser. They have just cancelled the Italian leg of their trip, they tell me. Not worth the risk, we agree.

I get home to the news that the United Nations has cancelled the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) meeting. Twelve thousand delegates from around the world had been due to arrive in New York for the ten-day meeting starting on Monday. The sizeable Australian delegation is no longer coming. Instead, I work my way through emails from several of them. My lunch with Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins won't be happening. Nor will the human rights panel I'd been invited to be part of by former SDC Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick. Or the various receptions, dinners and briefings that I had been looking forward to.

So far, the coronavirus had merely meant that we kept our distance from each other, but maybe that is about to change. The CSW cancellation is a big shock. I think about the impact on the city's economy. All those hotel rooms, restaurant meals, taxi rides and shopping excursions. Multiplied by 12,000 over 10 days. Suddenly, it seems serious. But it has not changed our lives in any meaningful way. We simply don't touch when we greet people. Not such a big deal. For those who abhor air kissing and similar social conventions, it's actually a relief.

The city seems to have run out of the vital substance we are all being told we need to keep ourselves safe.

But maybe it's time to start taking some precautions. I walk the three blocks to the local chemist, but they have sold out of hand sanitizer. I call my partner. He goes to three large chain pharmacies near his office. Same story. The city seems to have run out of the vital substance we are all being told we need to keep ourselves safe.

Friday March 6

Cases: 7

Yesterday Elizabeth Warren dropped out of the race for the Democratic Presidential primary. It is not a surprise. She had not been able to translate her early popularity and the enduring loyalty she continues to attract from her massive fan base into electoral success. She had failed to win a single primary, not even in her home state of Massachusetts, so there was now no path for her. Still it was a sad moment. This year's crowded field had included several competent female contenders, but Warren was clearly the smartest, and the one with concrete plans for how to govern. That does not seem to be what the electorate is looking for in 2020. Joe Biden has been rescued from the political graveyard of his early race disasters and, following his spectacular win in South Carolina on 29 February, cemented by his sweeping of Super Tuesday states on 3 March, seems to have a lock on the nomination.

Biden's Lazarus act could not have happened without the intervention of Rep. Jim Clyburn, a Democratic Party elder from South Carolina, currently the House Majority Whip and the most powerful member of the Congressional Black Caucus, who ensured Biden's stunning victory in his state. Biden, who in his three efforts running for President has never won a single primary or caucus, won every county in this key Southern state, and attracted 61 per cent of the Black vote. He scarcely campaigned and had no funds for advertising. This was more an intervention than a

comeback and signaled that the Democratic Party establishment had made its choice, which was vindicated by the Super Tuesday outcome.

But political news is rapidly fading into the background as anxiety about the coronavirus takes hold. Deaths are being reported in Washington state, at a nursing home. Are these isolated cases, able to be contained, or the beginning of the virus taking hold in the US?

Saturday March 7

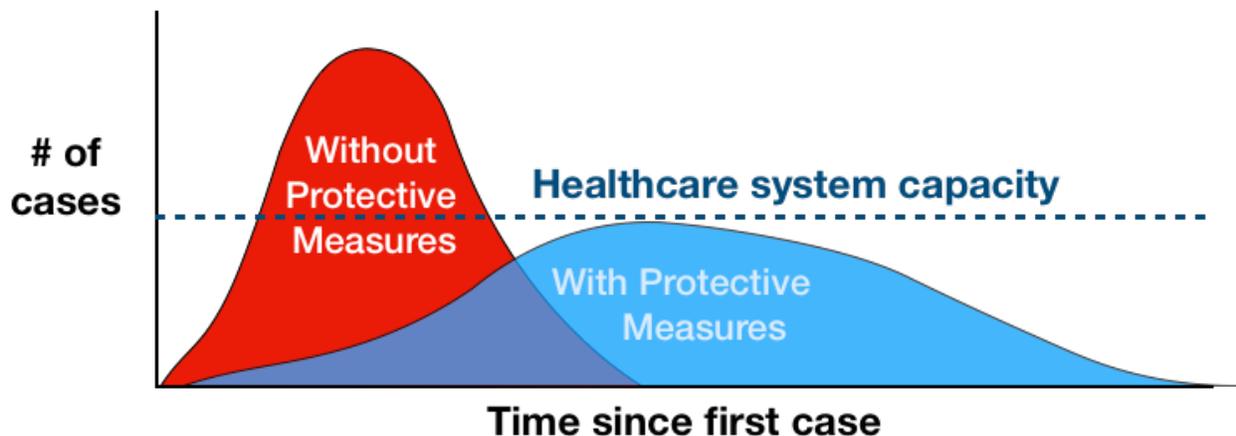
Cases: 12

Today was a normal Saturday for us, quiet, catching up on sleep, reading. Wondering just how bad it was going to get.

The financial markets are starting to react, with spiraling fears causing “financial carnage” according to today’s *New York Times*. The S&P 500 index has dropped 22 per cent since February 19, which is the sharpest drop in nine years, and has destroyed around \$3 trillion in wealth.

We are starting to learn a new vocabulary. The language of the coronavirus. We are told we need to “flatten the curve”, to “shelter-in-place”, and practice “social isolation”. Or, some are asking, should we let the virus rip, so we can develop “herd immunity”?

The flatten-the-curve graphic was designed by Dr Drew A. Harris, a population health analyst from Philadelphia. He had been in Seattle visiting his daughter when the first coronavirus case in the US was announced, in Oregon, and knew what was to come. He had years earlier designed an infographic for a pandemic preparedness training program, he told the *New York Times* in late March. “Folks in the preparedness and public health community have been thinking about all of these issues for many years,” Dr. Harris said. “Understanding and managing surge is an important part of preparedness.” But during the training course, Dr. Harris’s students had struggled with the concept of reducing the epidemic curve, so he added a dotted line indicating hospital capacity — “to make clear what was at stake,” he said.



Adapted from CDC / The Economist

An infographic by a data journalist to accompany an article in the *Economist* about the virus reminded Dr Harris of this work and he quickly recreated it and posted it to Twitter on 28 February: “Important to remember,” his post stated, “that #Covid-19 epidemic control measures may only delay cases, not prevent. However, this helps limit surge and gives hospitals time to prepare and manage. It’s the difference between finding an ICU bed & ventilator or being treated in the parking lot tent.”

The tweet quickly attracted more than one thousand retweets. Soon his accompanying infographic was being reproduced in media around the world and we were all starting to speak knowledgeably about the concept.

Someone even posted on social media a short video of people in an apartment building in Brooklyn yelling at passersby in the street below: “Go home! Flatten the curve!”

Sunday March 8

Cases: 14

There’s been plenty of talk about what is to come. How serious it might be. How risky. Even dangerous. But it is still startling when Governor Andrew Cuomo declares a state of emergency over the coronavirus. The declaration enables the state government to: expedite procurement of cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer and other essential resources; procurement of test supplies and equipment and leasing of lab space; and allows for qualified professionals others than doctors and nurses to conduct testing and for EMS to transport patients to quarantine locations other than hospitals. The proclamation also provides for action to be taken against price gouging.

The governor says that 76 confirmed cases have been identified in the State, 57 of them in heavily populated Westchester county, in the Hudson Valley, north of New York City.

Monday March 9

Cases: 25

Incredibly the Mayor, Bill de Blasio, has told New Yorkers to avoid the subway. There are more than six million rides each workday on the city’s storied transport system. How are people supposed to get to work? Especially if they live far away. My partner decided he will walk. It is a distance of 4.023 kms, according to Google Maps, from Dumbo to his office on Broadway in Soho. It should take 52 minutes. He walks across the Manhattan Bridge over the East River for the first time in his life, then makes his way along Canal Street, through the Lower East Side, then up Elizabeth Street towards NoLiTa and finally along Prince Street into Soho. It wasn’t so bad, he told me. The weather was mild, and he encountered very few other pedestrians. Social distancing is already happening. It took him 45 minutes. Then, at the end of the day, he did it again. “I’m not sure that I will be able to do this every day,” he says after he arrives home. Maybe he won’t have to. There is talk of Working From Home, with employers being encouraged to enable remote working for as many as possible of their staff.

Within a few days, subway ridership has plummeted by 60 per cent. The Mayor has vowed to keep the system going but as fewer and fewer people use it, the Metropolitan Transit Authority has responded by cutting services. Soon the trains are as crowded as ever, with those who have no choice but to take them risking their health and even their lives in order to get to their jobs.

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Tuesday March 10

Cases: 32

We learn there are now 173 confirmed cases of the virus in the state, up 31 from Monday. The vast majority of these cases, 108 in total, are in New Rochelle, a city of some 77,000 people located in New York's Westchester County. Today Governor Cuomo ordered a one mile "containment zone" around the Young Israel of New Rochelle synagogue where the virus was believed to have originated a week earlier. Five cases had been diagnosed within one family and all had been either hospitalized or placed in quarantine. All schools and other buildings in the area were closed, and the National Guard was to be deployed to help manage the situation, to ensure hygienic practices are observed. The political sensitivities of this situation are obvious, especially to the governor. "We are not containing people, we are containing facilities," Cuomo said. "This is literally life and death".

It is hard to know how to calculate the risks for oneself.

We live in a relatively small building. It's an old soap factory, in the waterfront area of Brooklyn known as Dumbo, overlooking the East River, that was converted to loft-style apartments in 2012. There are just 43 of these lofts. We have no doorman or concierge, just a superintendent and two porters, as they are called, guys who are basically cleaners, and who sort the garbage and recycling into the colour coded plastic bags required by the city before they can be placed outside for curbside pickup. The building management communicates directly with residents via email. Today, they informed us that automatic hand-sanitisers were to be installed, one in the lobby and one in the gym which is in the basement.

I decide to risk taking the subway, to Harlem, a trip of about 45 minutes. I am to meet with a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who have decided to come to New York anyway despite the cancellation of CSW. They will go ahead with their scheduled non-UN meetings. There are about a dozen of them, plus a Maori woman and another one from PNG, all staying in a handsome large brownstone on the corner of Malcolm X Boulevard and 123rd Street. I listen for almost three hours while they tell me about Breaking Silent Codes, the group they have founded to deal with sexual assault and domestic violence in First Nation communities. Most of the women are themselves survivors, and most have horrendous stories of the violence and trauma they have endured. I apologise for not grasping anyone's hand, let alone hugging them; it seems so inadequate, almost rude, to merely verbally thank people for sharing their searing stories. They are travelling to Long Island tomorrow to meet with Native American women who have similar stories to tell.

We are to have dinner that evening with Paul and Richard, friends who have relocated from NYC to Connecticut where they run a bookstore. We had wondered about the wisdom of gathering in a crowded restaurant. Especially after reading a blog from a Dutch doctor in Lombardy describing the chaos that has descended on hospitals in Northern Italy, people dying without treatment. Don't think it can't happen to you, the doctor warns: "Another typical attitude is read and listen to people saying things like this and think 'that's bad dude' and then go out for dinner because you think you'll be safe." Yes, that was us. Being cavalier. Hoping for the best. We met at Nomad Mexi-Cue on Fifth Avenue in the 20s. The place was packed. No fear of coronavirus here. People were being turned away.

Wednesday March 11

Cases: 53

Today the World Health Organization officially declared the coronavirus to be a pandemic, the official acknowledgment that it expects the virus will likely spread to all countries on the globe. This is not surprising news, given that 114 countries have now reported that 118,000 people have contracted Covid-19, as the disease caused by the virus, known as SARS-CoV2, is properly known. Nearly 4,300 people have died, the vast majority in China, Iran and Italy. "We expect to see the number of cases, the number of deaths, and the number of affected countries climb even higher," said Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

In the United States, where until very recently state and local laboratories were not permitted to test for the virus, just over 1,000 cases have been diagnosed and 29 people have died. It is obvious that these continuing limits on testing mean the full scale contamination of America is not known.

Our building management notifies of enhanced cleaning procedures for the common areas and informs us that building staff are now authorized to ask residents about their health and any recent travel before entering their apartments to undertake repairs. If there is cause for concern, any such repairs can be delayed. If they are urgent, and the resident has symptoms, or has travelled recently to China, Iran or Italy, they are asked to cover themselves and maintain a distance from the building staff member.

New York has finally cancelled the St Patrick's Day parade. Dublin had cancelled its parade a week ago, and Boston called its off two days earlier. It is big thing, an acknowledgement that life is not going to go on as usual. We are finally facing up to what is to come.

President Trump delivers an Address to the Nation from the Oval Office, the first time he has done so. He neither looks nor sounds like a President. He offers no consolation, can provide no moral guidance to get the nation through this. And, although he read the 11-minute speech and did not engage in any of his usual free-lancing, afterwards the White House had to "clarify" three errors of fact in the President's remarks.

I wasn't in New York for 9/11 in 2001 or for Superstorm Sandy in October 2012 so I have no experience of how the city deals with catastrophe. The 9/11 terrorist attacks came without warning, of course, on a clear blue September day but the trauma of that event was followed, in some ways

eclipsed, by the subsequent cleanup of the site and the ongoing health impacts of the toxic fumes that were released into the city that day. There are still advertisements in local media advising people who were impacted that day to make their claims for compensation. New York was able to prepare for Sandy although most of the damage was unable to be prevented, and parts of the city were without power and water for weeks.

Had I been living in Dumbo in 2001 the burning twin towers would have been clearly visible from my window. We are less than 2 miles from ground zero, and the toxic fumes from the collapse of the two towers billowed all over our part of Brooklyn. Thousands of commuters walked home that night across the Brooklyn Bridge because the subway was closed, and the next day the police department began moving abandoned cars from Lower Manhattan onto Washington Street, Dumbo's main drag.

“This is not the human condition,” Governor Cuomo told us during his briefing on March 23. “It is unnatural not to hug”.

Sandy flooded much of Dumbo, leaving shops and apartment building ground floors uninhabitable for months. The River Café, a fancy restaurant nestled on the water in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge, was destroyed. Stories abound of \$1500 bottles of wine being found bobbing along the East River in the weeks that followed. The big difference between those two tragedies and what is happening today is that we are denied human contact. Post 9/11 and Sandy people gathered together, seeking consolation, in bars or cathedrals or wherever human company was to be had. This time we are not allowed by the bedside of our dying family members. We cannot bury them. We cannot share family occasions such as birthdays. The lack of emotional consolation afforded by human contact is perhaps the worst of the damage being afflicted this latest catastrophe. “This is not the human condition,” Governor Cuomo told us during his briefing on March 23. “It is unnatural not to hug”. He told of his own pain in not being able to hug his daughters, or even to visit his mother.

Thursday March 12

Number of cases: 88

I will always remember this birthday. It was a biggish one, not a 0 but a 5, and I had been determined to celebrate it in style. My plan had been to have Martinis with a few close friends at Bemelmans Bar at the Carlyle Hotel. A very old-fashioned thing to do, I know, but it was my birthday and I'd do what I wanted. But I had not factored in a pandemic. None of the friends could make it. Even I concluded that it was, under the circumstances, too much of an indulgence.

But I kept my appointment at the hairdresser, and it was there I learned that, unbelievably, the Mayor had decreed that every theatre on Broadway must close. Now I will always associate this birthday with the day Broadway went dark. The Mayor also ordered that all bars and restaurants reduce their capacity by 50 per cent. The Metropolitan Museum of Art closed its doors, as did the Metropolitan Opera.

There were fewer than 100 confirmed cases in New York City, and no deaths, and yet these drastic actions were happening. That in itself was frightening. Then we learned that the Dow Jones had plunged 2400 points, its biggest single day drop since 1987's Black Monday.

Friday March 13

Cases: 137

Tonight, at midnight, the ban on travel to and from Europe comes into effect. There'd been confusion initially that Americans visiting Europe would not be permitted to return. But it was soon clarified that the travel ban applied only to Europeans from 26 Schengen countries, although not to the UK and Ireland. In a couple of days that will change and the Irish and the Poms will also be barred from entering the United States.

It seemed prudent to put down a few supplies, so I walked over to Wegman's the huge supermarket at Brooklyn Navy Yard which opened a few months ago and which has considerably expanded our local food shopping options. Their produce is fresh and reliable, grown on their own upstate farms, and their home brand staples are cheap. And I mean cheap. You can get a 1.75 litre bottle of fresh squeezed orange juice for \$2.47. That is at least \$2 less than the equivalent at any other local store. I should grab a few things, I thought to myself. Not stockpile. Stock up. Just essentials. In any case, I am limited by what I can carry. I've only got two arms and it's a 15-minute walk home, so my bags can't be too heavy.

I found the place had been stripped bare. I wandered the aisles in astonishment. The fresh produce section was almost totally empty. I grabbed a few pale tomatoes. Nothing like the succulent vine-ripened richly red ones I usually buy. The pasta shelves were bare. The entire freezer aisle, usually containing every imaginable item from ice cream to instant dinners, was dark. There was absolutely nothing left. "No cheese, no pasta, no tomatoes, no OJ", I texted my partner. "No onions, no garlic". Yet the place was crowded with shoppers optimistically pushing carts up and down aisles, as if their mere presence would somehow magically restock the shelves.

Everyone was dazed. You could see that it was starting to sink in. Food shortages. In America. This is our new reality.

Later that afternoon President Trump gave himself additional powers to deal with the looming public health crisis by declaring a "national emergency". "Two very big words," he said. Indeed. He made the announcement in the White House Rose Garden, against a backdrop of blossoming cherry trees, the sign that spring has begun in the nation's capital but there is no cause for the usual optimism and relief at the end of winter. All that matters is whether an inept and self-absorbed president is able to rise to the occasion. Despite seeing him surrounded by experts such as Dr Anthony Fauci, the infectious diseases expert, there is no reason to be confident. Does he even understand what is going to be required of him? Or is it all just words? And very big words at that.

This is a president who does not understand, or accept, the notion that the buck stops with him. He has no idea how to govern and nothing about his conduct suggests he even wants to learn. He sees

government agencies and employees as devices or tools, to be deployed – or destroyed – to suit his ideological or political purposes. The list of casualties is too long to be recorded here, and in any case is bound to grow even longer during this crisis as Trump lashes out in response to criticism, blaming all and anyone. He was asked today in the Rose Garden whether he accepted any responsibility for the delay in coronavirus testing that will probably cost untold lives. “No,” the President of the United States said, “I don’t take responsibility at all.”

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Saturday March 14

Cases: 183 Deaths: 2

The city records its first two deaths. Our building informs us that we can no longer accept deliveries at our apartment doors. This means that if we order in a meal, we will have to go downstairs to meet the deliverer at the front door. Likewise, with my Whole Foods deliveries. We do all our shopping on foot, so I have often relied on deliveries for such heavy items as olive oil or multiple cans of tomatoes, chickpeas and other staples. Now I will have to haul them upstairs myself (we have an elevator so not a huge imposition) and at least I don’t have to lug them home on the subway. Our nearest Whole Foods is in Manhattan, on the corner of Bowery and East Houston, three stops away on the F train. Getting there – in good times – is relatively easy. Coming home, laden with groceries, vegetables, flowers, laboring up the four flights of steps at York Street station then walking the four blocks to our building, is exhausting. Once I discovered that Whole Foods delivers to Dumbo, at a cost of just a \$7 tip for the deliverer, it was a no-brainer.

Sunday March 15

Cases: 269 Deaths: 5

Today the city ordered the closure of all schools, bars, restaurants, and movie theatres.

Closing the schools is a very big deal and has been the subject of fierce debate. New York’s public schools cater to 1.1 million children, 85 per cent of them are non-white. Many of these families are underprivileged and they rely on the schools for more than education. They provide childcare, they provide meals, as many as two a day, and even laundry services. With schools closed, a lot of kids will go hungry, and their parents might not be able to go to work.

Monday March 16

Cases: 464 Deaths: 9

My partner starts working from home. He has set up his telecommuting systems, connecting up the BlueJeans platform they will use for meetings. Videoconferencing is now the new norm. Although we work in different, albeit adjacent rooms, I learn that when people teleconference, they raise their voice. A lot. When I point this out, I am told I do the same thing whenever I am on a FaceTime or WhatsApp call to Australia. I retreat to my noise-cancelling headphones.

But raised voices are nothing. He has to set about the grim business of cancelling the literary festival he has labored over for the past year and whose [program](#) he had only just launched. It would have been the best of the three PEN World Voices Festivals he has directed so far.

“To live in a city like New York City, where I’ve spent most of my adult life, is to trade private space for public space. It’s to depend on interdependence.”

Michelle Goldberg, a *New York Times* columnist, writes a beautiful piece today entitled [“Grieving for my Sick City”](#): “To live in a city like New York, where I’ve spent most of my adult life, is to trade private space for public space. It’s to depend on interdependence. I don’t have a dining room, but I’ve been able to eat in thousands of restaurants. I have no storage space, but everything I needed was at the bodega. I don’t have a home office, but I could work at coffee shops. Now those supports are gone”.

I am used to working from home. As a writer I have done for more than twenty years now, so I do not expect my life to be very different. I don’t go to cafes to work. Often, I go for days without leaving the apartment so this will not be the hardship for me that it will be for many others.

But I have other supports that now are gone. Some of the smaller theatres which had previously thought they could hold out announced their closing, like the Brooklyn Academy of Music (known as BAM) and which hosts film and drama as well as opera and other music, and where in early February we’d seen Rose Byrne perform in Simon Stone’s revolutionary imagining of *Medea*. And Dumbo’s own St Ann’s Warehouse, home to some of New York’s most innovative theatre, and just a short walk from our apartment. Last November we had been exhilarated by the Schaubuhne Berlin’s production of *History of Violence*, based on the extremely confronting autobiographical novel by the young French literary sensation Edouard Louis about a casual pickup in Paris one New Year’s Eve turning into a brutal rape.

I cannot believe that the Strand Bookstore has closed its doors although it will continue to trade online. Shakespeare & Co. on the Upper East Side is still open, astonishingly, but the trendy McNally Jackson bookstore in Soho which recently underwent a rapid expansion, opening new stores at La Guardia Airport, Brooklyn Heights and South Street seaport, has laid off almost 80 staff. They will be paid until the end of the week, will retain their health insurance until the end of the month and will be rehired after the crisis. Whenever that might be.

Guns, on the other hand, are thriving. Today the FBI did a record number of background checks on gun sales: up 300 per cent in a single day.

Tuesday March 17

Cases: 923 Deaths: 7

It's St Patrick's Day. Usually a time of joyful craziness in New York City, with the famous Fifth Avenue Parade, green beer and African American cops proclaiming their essential Irishness. Was it just a week ago that the Staten Island parade was, yet again, denying LGBTQs the right to march? That barrier fell in Manhattan just five years ago, after newly elected Mayor Bill de Blasio refused to march in 2014, saying he would not be part of any gathering that excluded fellow citizens. Now nobody will be marching, the bagpipes won't be playing, and there will be no wearing of the green.

Appropriately enough on St Patrick's Day, I get an email from Blanc et Rouge, my local grog shop in Washington Street, advising us they were waiting to hear if the Mayor is going to issue a Shelter in Place Order and how that would affect their ability to trade. This small shop has survived the "the financial crisis", as the GFC is called here, Hurricane Sandy and now this: "We are committed to staying open in order to provide whatever small comforts we can to the community, as well as jobs for our employees. But we will only do so as long as we believe it is both safe and permitted".

I fervently hope they will be allowed to remain open. We will need lots of wine to get us through this.

Yesterday the FDNY broke up an Hasidic wedding with more than 200 guests in Williamsburg which was clearly in breach of the rules prohibiting large gatherings. Strange, I think, that it is the Fire department asked to do this, and not the Police department.

Today the city announces that "grab-and-go" breakfasts will from now on be available at every public school (even those that are technically closed) so kids can still get something to eat. The MetGala, *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour's fabulous frock fest held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the first Monday in May that always attracts mega-media for the dazzling array of celebrities who strive to out-dress each other, has joined the long list of event cancellations.

Things are really getting dire.

Wednesday March 18, 2020

Cases: 923 am 2009 pm Deaths: 21

New York City Health has started posting details of new cases twice a day so, from now on, so will I. The number of confirmed cases is skyrocketing. It was 923 this morning but when the Mayor gave a radio interview in early evening it had climbed to 1,871. Before the day was over, the number was 2009.

I hear from Gary and Mez O'Neill that they had just managed to get a flight out of Ireland where they'd been since leaving New York on 7 March. They are now in Portugal trying to negotiate a flight home. They will have to travel via Geneva, Helsinki and Singapore, their trip of a lifetime

disintegrating, like everything else, in the face of a wrathful virus that is changing everything about how we live.

We had tickets to hear Hilary Mantel talk tonight at the 92Y about *The Mirror and the Light*, the final book in her Cromwell trilogy. The cancellation of this relatively small event did not rate a mention on the [Forbes magazine cancellation tracker](#) which does what its name suggests, recording the main sporting, arts and other key events around the world, and their anticipated audiences, that are now cancelled due to the coronavirus. The tracker concentrates on the biggies, like the Olympics, and Wimbledon, the French Open, the British Open, Major League baseball, Major League Soccer, the Hockey League, the London and Boston marathons and the New York half-marathon, NASCAR, the many St Patricks' Day parades, Broadway, the Tonys, Coachella, the Edinburgh International Festival, the London Book Fair, Art Basel and tours by Madonna, Billie Eilish and Pearl Jam, and RuPaul's DragCon. The PEN World Voices Festival, or the Sydney Writers Festival and the many other Australian literary events that have been cancelled, were not included either so the tally of people affected by these event cancellations can't be considered reliable. Even so the *Forbes* calculation is still a huge number: 52 million people. If there is a tracker recording lost jobs and revenue as a result of these cancellations, I have not found it. But it is impossible to overlook that this catastrophe has many dimensions, and lasting consequences that we can scarcely even begin to imagine.

*“People are dying who have never died before,”
the President of the United States intoned today,
the day there was a 39 per cent spike in deaths in
America.*

The Dow has now lost all gains since Trump became President, denying him a major boasting point. This is one measure the President understands. It is more obvious every day that he is unable to comprehend what is happening, and he simply does not have the language to even talk about it. “People are dying who have never died before,” the President of the United States intoned today, the day there was a 39 per cent spike in deaths in America.

Everything for him is “beautiful” or “big” or “perfect”. These are not the words for these times.

In 2017 the great American novelist Philip Roth estimated that Donald Trump had a vocabulary of just 77 words. It may well be smaller now. Roth's assessment, expressed to the *New Yorker's* Judith Thurman in January 2017, is worth quoting in full: “I was born in 1933, the year that F.D.R. was inaugurated. He was President until I was twelve years old. I've been a Roosevelt Democrat ever since. I found much that was alarming about being a citizen during the tenures of Richard Nixon and George W. Bush. But, whatever I may have seen as their limitations of character or intellect, neither was anything like as humanly impoverished as Trump is: ignorant of government, of history, of science, of philosophy, of art, incapable of expressing or recognizing subtlety or nuance, destitute of all decency, and wielding a vocabulary of seventy-seven words that is better called Jerkish than English.”

Three years later, that observation is confirmed every time Trump gets in front of a microphone.

Thursday 19 March

Cases: 2469 am 3615 pm Deaths: 25

There is a big rise in cases due to a surge in testing. New York State is now permitted by the federal government to use private labs to do tests.

As of this morning, 2382 New York City residents have tested positive for COVID-19 with 9534 tested, Governor Cuomo said. Just hours later the number had jumped to 3615, with 25 people dead. It was hard believe. Just yesterday cases for the US as a whole jumped by 46 per cent from 6362 to 9285, while deaths increased 39 per cent from 108 to 150. By the end of the day, the number infected was 13,737. What happened in Italy, in Spain, it's happening here.

I wake to the news that Australia has closed its borders to all non-residents. I wonder if I am classified as a non-resident. But it is quickly an academic question: Qantas has grounded its international fleet. Even if I wanted to, and at the moment I very much do, I am not able to return home.

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I get a WhatsApp message from the O'Neills, home again in Sydney after a "chaotic" flight. "Europe is in meltdown," they tell me. Their luggage is lost, and they are required to undergo 14 days self-quarantine, but they are relieved to be back. I can't help but smile. Australia now has 500 cases. For the entire country. If I were there, I would think that was terrible. But I am here. Where things are very different.

Cuomo announces the suspension of all mortgage payments, credit card, ATM and other bank charges without impact on credit ratings. Also, that all employers can allow only 25 per cent of their workforce onsite, down from 50 per cent yesterday.

But for an increasing number of employees there is no longer a workplace to go to. More than 1000 hospitality workers at New York's three airports were abruptly terminated today, with no notice and no severance pay. These are the people who staffed the ubiquitous CIBO booths selling snacks and beverages to travelers at JFK, La Guardia and Newark airports. They would retain their health insurance until March 31, the company announced. Some of those laid off had worked at these jobs for more than 20 years.

California is extending the restrictions that so far have applied to just a few cities to the entire state, requiring all 40 million of its residents to "shelter-in-place" and to practice social distancing if they leave their homes. New York is still debating whether to do this.

Friday March 20

Cases: 4000 am 5151 pm Deaths: 43

The iconic marble lions, Patience and Fortitude, have stood guard outside New York's massive public library on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street since the library was inaugurated on 22 May 1911. The lions are made from porous Tennessee pink marble which absorbs the dirt and the dust of the city, not to mention the countless indignities inflicted on them by tourists in search of bespoke photo opportunities. Every seven or so years, Patience and Fortitude need to be covered and cleaned. The most recent cleaning took place late last year, so the two lions have only recently re-emerged, in time to stand guard before a shuttered library.

They were originally named Lenox and Astor for the wealthy benefactors who founded the Library but during the 1930s Depression New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia renamed them for the qualities New Yorkers would need to get them through the economic meltdown. Those qualities are needed once again.

The Library announced this morning that it was extending its closure from the original March 31 date. All branches are now "closed until further notice". Best to keep the re-opening open-ended, rather than have to keep changing projected dates. "Our lions, Patience and Fortitude, have stood for over a century as symbols of New York City's resilience and determination during a multitude of storms and difficult moments," wrote NYPL President Anthony W. Marx in an email to supporters. "That attitude and what they represent is as important today as ever before. I have faith that this City will stand strongly and calmly with them, and weather yet another storm".

"Our lions, Patience and Fortitude, have stood for over a century as symbols of New York City's resilience and determination during a multitude of storms and difficult moments..."

At noon, Governor Cuomo orders a "PAUSE" which stands for "Policies that Assure Uniform Safety for Everyone". It is "shelter in place" in all but name; no way was Cuomo going to go along with what Mayor de Blasio wanted. Very strict rules, with penalties attached, about leaving the house are announced. It starts on Sunday at 8pm.

Governor Cuomo announces that all barber shops, hair and nail salons, tattoo and piercing parlours and other personal care businesses in New York State must close. Liquor stores, however, are deemed essential and allowed to remain open. The Marriage Bureau is not. It is nine months, almost to the day, since we were married there. It is a place that typifies the eclecticism and the tolerance of New York, where couples of all ages and identities are accorded the solemnity of having their union sanctioned by the city.

Today the streets of Dumbo are a lot more deserted than yesterday. Then there had been maybe a dozen tourists on Washington Street angling themselves to capture what has become NY's most iconic visual: a shot of the Empire State Building through the Manhattan bridge's stately girders. People come from around the world to put themselves in this shot. Today there was no one.

Starbucks has closed, as has the tacos place which is takeaway only so is permitted to open. All bars are closed, and all restaurants. Time Out Market, the so-called “New York on a plate” very upscale food court serving nothing but the best and most interesting of the city’s restaurants, which only opened in the summer, has closed. There is now nowhere to go in Dumbo. Nowhere at all.

It is easy enough to practice “social distancing” on the streets as there are so few people around. No one is wearing masks. A couple of large construction sites still operating so there are dozens of high viz vest wearing workers in Dumbo Market, a local supermarket, getting their lunch.

I learned that Brooklyn has the highest rate of infection, with some 1500 of today’s total of 5151 cases, but I doubt that many – if any – of these were in Dumbo. This hunch is later confirmed when the city publishes a map of infection rates by postcode. Dumbo and Brooklyn Heights, along with most of Manhattan and Staten Island, have the lowest rates in the city. Outer Brooklyn, much of Queens and some pockets of the Bronx are deep purple, the color indicating that 80 per cent of those tested are positive.

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I posted on Instagram and Facebook a photograph of some almost-dead red tulips in a vase on the dining room table where I work. “These are probably my last fresh flowers for some time. This photo will sustain me long after they are dead,” I wrote, and in response received a surprisingly large, and very welcome, number of consoling messages from friends and acquaintances in Australia. Several people have started sending me, via social media, gorgeous photographs of flowers, some sending new ones every day.

Saturday 21 March

Cases: 6211 am 8115 pm Deaths: 60

The [daily press briefing](#) by New York Governor Andrew Cuomo is now attracting millions of viewers, in the US and around the world, via cable channels CNN and MSNBC and via streaming from the governor’s website. He is a calm and authoritative presence who gives us the daily news, almost all of it bad in the form of increased numbers of infected and dead, or looming shortages of medical equipment and clothing. But he is also a consoling figure, guiding us through how to handle what is happening with an empathy that we had forgotten could be found in our leaders.

“We’ll get over it,” he says. “Let’s find our better selves doing it. Let’s be socially isolated, but spiritually connected.”

It’s going to be hard, he tells us, it’s going to be horrible, I know that. It is for him, too, since he lives alone now that he and his long-time girlfriend have broken up. (He and his wife, a Kennedy, split years ago). He knows what it’s like to have cabin fever, he says: “Sometimes I get annoyed with my dog.”

There is a bit of a cult developing around the 62-year-old governor. One of the daily tabloids dubs him “the LuvGov” as more and more women are asking: “Is he single?” [Randy Rainbow](#), an Emmy nominated singer and satirist, declares himself a “cuomosexual” in [Andy](#), the latest of his hilarious political parodies mocking Trump and Pence that have become required watching for so many of us. You can tell that Cuomo in no way minds all this attention. But whenever he asked, and he is asked frequently now, if he is running for President, he says he is very happy in his current job.

All the cable talk show hosts are now broadcasting from their homes, with their guests joining in via Skype or FaceTime or similar platforms. In the studio, the guests are made up and homogenized, whereas they somehow seem more authentic in their homes. Even if mostly they position themselves in front of tactically curated bookshelves, and sometimes the sound or the lighting is a bit off. But it is a trend that might be worth continuing once – if – we return to normal. No doubt the networks are looking at this. It must save a lot of money.

Sunday March 22

Cases: 10,764 (only pm published today). Deaths: 99

Everything changes today. New York’s lockdown – known as PAUSE – goes into effect and people can only leave the house to buy food or medicine, walk the dog or engage in solitary exercise. A special law is enacted for those aged 70 or over, and those with compromised immune systems. It requires them to remain indoors at all times unless going outside only for solitary exercise, to pre-screen all visitors by taking their temperature, to wear a mask in the company of others, to stay at least six feet away from other people and to take public transport only if absolutely necessary.

“I call it Matilda’s Law,” says Governor Cuomo. “My mother’s name is Matilda. Everybody’s mother, father, sister, friend in a vulnerable population – this is about protecting them. What you do highly, highly affects their health and wellbeing.”

Today New York hospitals announce a ban on all visitors, including partners of women in labor. I can only imagine how tough, and even terrifying, this is going to be for women giving birth. All alone. No familiar face to help them through.

Late this evening, Trump weighs in with a tweet: “We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself. At the end of the 15-day period, we will make a decision as to which way we want to go”.

On March 16 Trump had announced guidelines that, if followed “will have a resounding impact on public health”. Intended to build on current Centers for Disease Control instructions about hand-washing and other hygiene, Americans were instructed to stay home if they or their children were sick or if someone in their house had tested positive, or if they were “an older American” or had an underlying health condition.

The guidelines were intended be in effect for 15 days and so had another week to go. Now the president seemed to be signalling that he had tired of protecting public health.

Monday March 23

Cases. 12,339 am 13,119 pm Deaths: 125

Our second week of my partner working from home, and our first week of social isolation. It is almost 14 days since our dinner at the Mexican restaurant and, so far, no symptoms. By tomorrow we can rest easy – and of course not take any such risks again

Shelter in place is not the hardship for us that it is for so many New Yorkers. We don’t have children to schedule and homeschool. Or a dog to walk. Our routine is very simple: apart from our work which for both of us is currently full-on and demanding, it’s Cuomo at 11.30, Trump at 6 or whenever he decides to appear at the podium in the White House press briefing room. In between we eat our meals, check our social media feeds and do all the things we normally do. Apart, that is, from going outside.

We are lucky to have an apartment that is big enough for us both to have a separate room to work in. We have a large casement window that lets in lots of light and allows us expansive views of the Manhattan skyline, the East River, the Williamsburg Bridge and, best of all, lots and lots of sky. We will not suffer cabin fever so long as we can see the sky.

I lived for a very short time once in a tiny apartment on the Upper West Side that looked out into a lightwell. No external windows. If I was there now, I would go crazy. If we had lots of people living with us, I’d go crazy. Unlike many, perhaps most, people, we have it easy. Except, perhaps, for the many who have left the city. David tells me that more than half the residents of his Riverside Drive apartment building have fled to their second homes in the Hamptons or Upstate. I hear similar stories from other Manhattan buildings.

But I find it very hard to focus. I have two very big deadlines. This journal is due on April 9, and just five days later I have to submit a large and important report on domestic violence I have been working on for several months. These are both important projects, they are both jobs that I sought and that I enjoy, so why can’t I focus? Is it anxiety? Why do I break away every half hour or so to neurotically check the latest figures for cases and deaths? Or my Twitter feed for news of the latest economic or cultural casualty of the coronavirus.

And that is how I learn that the governor of Texas has issued an executive order demanding an immediate halt to all “medically unnecessary surgeries and procedures, including abortion”. Wow. Talk about taking advantage of a crisis to advance a completely unrelated agenda.

Today sees the end of the valiant efforts by the city's independent bookstore to stay open. Shakespeare and Co bookshop announced it was closing last night. While most of the city's other independent bookstores had closed a week ago, Shakespeare had soldiered on, offering curbside pickup for customers. And today it is Strandbooks: they had attempted to keep going, selling online, but clearly it has not worked. They announced they were laying off 180 staff.

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Tuesday March 24

Cases: 14,776 am 15,597 pm Deaths: 192

"We are your future," says Cuomo today, talking about other parts of America. "We are the canary in the coalmine." The curve in NY has not flattened, instead it has exploded upwards, leading to a greatly increased prediction of hospital bed requirements (140k rather than the 110K previously projected.)

Yet Trump announces he wants people back at work by April 12. He wants "the churches crowded for Easter". When asked why he chose Easter as the return to work? "It's a beautiful time," he says.

We don't lack for entertainment: Patrick Stewart, famous for being Captain Star Trek, and who is a resident of Park Slope, Brooklyn reads a Shakespeare sonnet daily on Twitter, to an audience of 1.3 million people. While the beloved Patti Smith is doing concerts on Instagram, singing with her daughter Jessie.

Wednesday 25 March

Cases: 16,788 am 20,011 pm Deaths: 280 deaths

The Lt Gov of Texas Dan Patrick said out loud today what Donald Trump has been thinking (and was perhaps a stalking horse for the President): "...let's get back to work, let's get back to living. Let's be smart about it and those of us who are 70-plus, we'll take care of ourselves. But don't sacrifice the country, don't do that, don't ruin this great America."

His remarks led to outrage that he was proposing to let over 70s die in exchange for saving the economy. "My mother is not expendable. And your mother is not expendable," said our new political leader, Governor Cuomo. "We are not going to accept the premise that human life is disposable. We're not going to put a dollar figure on human life."

Andrew Cuomo has become the sole voice of opposition challenging Trump and his cronies over the management of the crisis. Missing in action are Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer and, the presumptive Democratic nominee for President, Joe Biden. Cuomo has the authority and can find

the words, usually very inspiring words, every time, to stake out the moral high ground while at the same time rolling up his sleeves and doing the heavy lifting of managing an unprecedented health crisis in the largest state of the union.

By contrast, New York's Mayor is inept and bumbling. Today, he told CNN's Anderson Cooper that half of New York's 8 million population are likely to get the coronavirus. Hardly a statement to calm an already anxious cooped up population, who were unlikely to be assuaged by his further comment that 80 per cent of us would have only mild symptoms.

Nor was his order to have the basketball hoops removed from 80 play areas around the city because people were ignoring the distancing order. No persuasion, or exhortation to our better selves, just a laying down of the law. Di Blasio said he was also considering closing the city's parks and playgrounds.

Governor Cuomo took a different tack: "We're going to get through it because we are New York and because we've dealt with a lot of things, and because we are smart. You have to be smart to make it in New York. And we are resourceful, and we are showing how resourceful we are. And because we are united, and when you are united, there is nothing you can't do. And because we are New York tough. We are tough. You have to be tough. This place makes you tough, but it makes you tough in a good way."

"...we are New York tough. We are tough. You have to be tough. This place makes you tough, but it makes you tough in a good way."

Thursday 26 March

Cases: 21,873 am 23,112 pm Deaths: 365

This afternoon the US surpassed China as the country with the most confirmed cases, with 13,967 new cases today taking us to a total of 81,178. It is truly a shocking moment as we surge past Italy and Spain, those countries we had seen as unable to control their pandemic. Donald Trump, making American great again. By the end of the day, the tally is just over 100,000. We are at the top of the leader board maintained by the website worldometers.info which tallies infections, new cases, and deaths for every country in the world.

In our little corner of the country we are now taking the whole thing extremely seriously. We have done a hospital-grade sterilization of our apartment, doing our best to create a sealed safe space. Every surface got a thorough disinfecting. By the time we had finished the place had the virtuous smell of Lysol. It is now on us to ensure that no hint of virus can breach our little fortress.

We watched a You Tube video of a doctor advising how to do this. We now remove our shoes at the door. We shuck off our coats and gloves and store them close to the exit. One of us then prepares the kitchen counter to receive the shopping. We spray the surface with Lysol then set up

two zones: the area for putatively infected incoming shopping bags, mail or packages and the sterile space. We spray or wipe every item before placing it in the safe space. Mail is sanitized. So are packages from Amazon before we tear them open for their contents which are then subjected to the same precaution. We clean our money and our keys. We wash all fruit, and vegetables with skins, in hot soapy water; leafy vegetables and bunches of herbs are doused in cold water. We call this “extreme hygiene”. We hope it will do the trick.

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This afternoon David Hay sends me an article from today’s [New York magazine](#) Intelligencer newsletter. It’s an interview with Peter Shearer, my companion at David’s birthday dinner, in which he describes what has befallen his hospital:

“Three weeks ago when we started to plan for this we came up with ideas like, *This is the room that we’ll put a [seriously ill] coronavirus patient in. And then if there are a bunch of other patients, maybe four or five who are slightly sick, we’ll put them in this area where we close the door and keep them separate from everyone else.* We were thinking about this room and that room. And now I’m up to 27 patients in my emergency department who are positive, waiting for beds in the hospital, and another 24 who are under evaluation. Those plans are ancient history now. In an ideal world, everyone has their own room, they would have negative pressure airflow and a face mask on and a dedicated nurse to care for them with a moderate ratio of patients. We can’t do that. No one can do that right now. Every hospital in New York is a variation of mine.

Three weeks ago, Peter and I were exchanging pleasantries over braised branzino at Via Carota . Now, he is in a version of hell that, he says, the city has not seen before:

“People have compared this to the early days of HIV. It feels like I can imagine how that was, but the numbers are more now. If you went back to that time, it was predominantly the gay community and focused in certain geographic parts of the city. This is every single hospital in the city, multiple patients dropping their oxygen levels surprisingly fast and being put on ventilators with no way to make them better. I’ve been through the blackout. I’ve been through Sandy. I’ve been through the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic. And this is different. 9/11 was a horrendous thing, but there was no impact like this on hospitals. Sandy, some hospitals were completely devastated, and it was horrendous and awful, but the weather got better. And you could start cleaning up. But this is just getting worse. I have never been in a war. It feels like a war.

He has not yet had to resort to the Department of Health guidelines about how to triage in the case of a shortage of ventilators. But he knows that time is coming: ‘Basically, you give scores to patients based on how sick they are, and that helps you to assign a triage level to different people and then make those decisions of: *I have one ventilator and two patients, which one am I*

choosing. Or: I have a 30-year-old in my ER and an 87-year-old in my ICU, and it gives you guidance to take the person in the ICU off the ventilator and give it to the 30-year-old.'

There's a refrigerated truck outside Peter's office. The hospital's morgue can hold only about five bodies so the truck is there for the overflow. "I haven't had to use it yet," he says. "Inside it's just a cold metal space. It's not very respectful at the moment. I'm not going to hang curtains in it, but it needs to be a little bit more ... something."

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Tonight at 7 pm New Yorkers started emulating Britons by going to their windows and stoops and balconies and clapping enthusiastically to show their gratitude towards essential workers. We want to join in but there is no point where we live. We do not have a balcony and we do not look out over any other residential buildings. We would be clapping into a void. We watch videos of Manhattanites clapping and cheering, banging saucepans, and are glad. Glad that our fellow human beings are still so, well, human, able to express thanks, to be selfless and appreciative and to show it. We get no guidance on how to behave from Washington. Thank goodness we don't need it.

Friday March 27

Cases: 25,573 am 26,697 pm Deaths: 450

Neither of us have left the apartment for eight days. I have been down to the mailbox once a day and not seen a single other person. Not one. Some of our neighbours appear to have left town as well. We will need to go out again soon, for fresh vegetables and orange juice, but our isolation has been surprisingly bearable. We know we are luckier than many other New Yorkers.

The worst part of it is watching the President at his daily press briefings. Each day seems more excruciating than the one before. Even after three years of him, the current displays of naked self-obsession and need for approval are jaw-droppingly embarrassing. Today he reveals that he will not extend any federal assistance to states whose governors do not show sufficient appreciation.

"If they don't treat you right, I don't call", he told reporters – and his television audience of millions. "I say, 'Mike, don't call the governor of Washington, you're wasting your time with him. Don't call the woman in Michigan,'" the president said he told his Vice-President Mike Pence. "That woman in Michigan" is Governor Gretchen Whitmer, a popular and seemingly effective state leader who had asked the President to declare a state of emergency in Michigan

that would give her access to emergency funds to help deal with the growing coronavirus crisis in her state.

The President refused her request. She was a “nasty” woman, he said, because she had criticized him. This is Trump’s favourite – indeed his only – word for describing women who stand up to him. Who take him on. He used it against Hillary Clinton. At the same time as he was attacking Governor Whitmer, he used it to attack Mary Barra, the CEO of General Motors who, he asserted, was not sufficiently respectful in her dealings with him over retooling GM plants to produce ventilators. And he used it to describe a question on March 13 from Yamiche Alcindor, the White House correspondent for PBS NewsHour. She had asked him whether closing down the White House pandemic office had slowed the country’s response to the Coronavirus. Trump responded by calling it “a nasty question” – and not answering it.

[Trump backed down on the state of emergency request from Governor Whitmer the next day, after a barrage of criticism. He cannot withstand pressure. He needs to bask in love and approval. The whole time.]

Today the US passed 100,000 cases, with 1500 dead.

One of the unanticipated delights of the lockdown and the social isolation has been to watch creative geniuses around the world use Zoom and other similar technologies to bring their craft, or their institution. Audiences who would once never have had access to such wonders can now enjoy them without having to get on a plane, or a subway, or take a taxi. We can now visit the world’s great art galleries and museums without leaving the house. And, even more amazingly, we’ve been able to watch renowned orchestras and other performers create a unified sound from their individual apartments or houses. At first, it had the magic of the new, then everyone seemed to be doing it but somehow it still seems fresh and enticing. I loved seeing the Sydney Philharmonic Choirs perform Bach’s [St John’s Passion](#) on Easter Saturday. And the original cast of *Hamilton* perform the [title song](#) of that extraordinary Broadway creation to entertain a young girl. The offerings are rich and many. The Metropolitan Opera has an unprecedented program of some of the great performances from its current season, streaming free of charge. What an incredible offering. It costs around \$400 for a decent ticket to the Opera, so it is not something I have done very often. But we have not been watching. And not sure why. Is it because we need something grittier for these dark days?

Last week we re-watched the first two seasons of The Sopranos. A reminder of those more innocent days when living dangerously meant immersing ourselves in the world of a fictional Mafioso crime family in New Jersey.

Last week we re-watched the first two seasons of *The Sopranos*. A reminder of those more innocent days when living dangerously meant immersing ourselves in the world of a fictional Mafioso crime family in New Jersey.

This week we decided to re-watch seasons 1 and 2 of *Ozark* before tuning into the newly dropped season 3. *Ozark*, involving a very different kind of crime family and set in rural Missouri, is one of those shows that, even in the continuing golden age of television, surpasses all expectations with its acting and its writing. And it is so dark that it almost seems like light relief from what is happening outside in this great city brought to its knees by a virus.

Saturday March 28

Cases: 29,158 am 30,765 pm. 672 deaths

Today is the first time I have felt fear, and trepidation, that we might not get out of this. What prompted this, weirdly enough, was reading that many of the fancy stores in Soho, once an artists' district now an upmarket shopping and tourist destination in downtown New York, had not just closed but were being boarded up. There were photographs, in the *Times*, of Dolce & Gabbana, Chloe, Fendi, Celine and Chanel with plywood sheets nailed across their fancy shopfronts. And it wasn't just the expensive clothes shops. Sephora, a makeup emporium which is vastly popular across a range of income groups, and Aesop, the Australian skincare chain, were also not just shuttered, but boarded up.

Obviously, the word had gone around to Soho merchants that they had better guard against looting. Seriously! Food and booze, I could understand. And TVs and iPads. Even clothing, but you'd think jeans and sweats rather than more formal finery. But would looters really be ransacking stores for luxury handbags and night-repair lotions? The boarded-up shopfronts seemed to me to portend a wider social breakdown, a kind of anarchy that was without political or social purpose. If lawlessness of this kind was looming, who could say what would happen to those of us obediently locked away in our apartments. So far we've each been, quietly and mostly privately, dreading the bedlam of the emergency room or the death sentence of the ICU. Now do we also need to fear marauding mobs? When they've had their fill of makeup and Fendi baguettes, where to next? Most New York apartment buildings are easily breached and would provide rich pickings. Will they hunt down drugs, guns, even – if supply chains fail us – food? We've all watched *Contagion*. We know what happens next.

We've all watched Contagion. We know what happens next.

Such fears are only reinforced by learning that this month saw the biggest spike in gun sales in the US since January 2013 when the double-whammy of the re-election of President Barack Obama and the slaughter of 20 elementary school children and six of their teachers at Sandy Hook in Connecticut saw millions of Americans rush to their local gun stores. Television news is showing long lines of people outside these emporia of death. Their desire to affirm the 2nd amendment reinforced, no doubt, by a video released last week by the National Rifle Association in which an activist warns, 'If you aren't preparing to defend your property when everything goes wrong, you're really just stockpiling for somebody else'.

Yet, so far at least, the epidemic has seen crime rates drop. Almost all categories of crime are down, not just in New York but across the country. With everyone staying-at-home street crime is inevitably less likely, as are burglaries since people are at home now at what used to be prime time for such crimes. Even the bad guys want to avoid the virus, the joke is. And to put things into perspective, there were 319 murders in the city for the whole of last year. Just yesterday, 450 New Yorkers died from the virus. The Mayor of Baltimore, Jack Young, issued an ultimatum last week after a mass shooting: ‘We cannot clog up our hospitals and their beds with people who are being shot senselessly because we’re going to need those for people who might be infected with the coronavirus,’ Young said. ‘It could be your mother, your grandmother, one of your relatives so take that into consideration and put down the guns.’

The only good news is that the coronavirus appears to have put a halt to school shootings.

His appeal appeared not to work. The number of homicides in Baltimore is around the same as this time last year. The city that gave us *The Wire*, one of the finest dissections of urban decay and its attendant political corruption ever seen on television, is living up to its reputation. The only good news is that the coronavirus appears to have put a halt to school shootings.

Nevertheless, my trepidation increased when I, along with millions of others, read Harry Siegel’s *New York Daily News* article that canvassed the idea that New York, the current epicenter of the virus and yet to reach its anticipated apex, might be physically separated from the rest of America. All it would take, Siegel pointed out, would be to close the airports, and the six bridges and tunnels that connect Manhattan with New Jersey. He ruminated that soon Trump would be calling it “the New York flu”. New Yorkers would be the pariahs, blamed for a pandemic whose impact could have been mitigated had the president taken it seriously. What would be the consequences for those millions of us sequestered on these small islands off the coast of the mainland United States? One more thing to be anxious about.

Later that day, Trump indeed stoked those fears by allowing another thought bubble to escape from his undisciplined lips: he was considering quarantining the entire tri-state area (New York, New Jersey and Connecticut).

He said this in Norfolk, Virginia while farewelling the gigantic Navy hospital ship USNS *Comfort* being dispatched to New York to add to hospital bed capacity. Trump had ignored security and other advice and made the 200-mile trip from the White House to the naval base to “kiss goodbye” a ship he hoped would bolster his own political fortunes. He was not allowed to be in New York to welcome the ship (Secret Service advice apparently) so had to hijack the occasion with an outrageous lie: during his speech he said he had informed Governor Cuomo of the quarantine proposal during a telephone call earlier that day.

Trump’s lies are so blatant, so second nature to him that he might possibly be unaware of when he has wandered into fabulism. He made the quarantine comment while Governor Cuomo was giving his daily briefing, now watched by millions around America, and of course a journalist asked him about it. He never talked to me about it, said New York’s governor, providing an instant fact-

check on yet another presidential whopper. I don't know what he means by quarantine, Cuomo said, but I don't like the sound of it.

Andrew Cuomo is emerging as Trump's most formidable foe, the calm and knowledgeable figure of authority versus the undisciplined fabulist who so patently is in over his head.

They are two boys from Queens – from New York, the pariah state – facing off in what may well be the fight for the future of America. As [Maureen Dowd](#), the *New York Times* columnist, noted in an insightful profile of the two men: “The Trump family is a model of bad nepotism — noblesse oblige in reverse. Such is their reputation as scammers that congressional Democrats felt the need to put a provision in the coronavirus rescue bill to try to prevent Trump-and-Kushner Inc. from carving out a treat of their own.

“Cuomo-style nepotism at least has better values. Donald Trump got his start with his father discriminating against black tenants in their housing complexes; Andrew Cuomo left his job as a political enforcer for his father, Mario Cuomo, also a three-term governor of New York, and created a national program to provide housing for the homeless.

“... as Lis Smith, the Democratic strategist who rumbled in New York politics before becoming Mayor Pete's Pygmalion, said, ‘Trump is selfishly ruthless for his own personal gain while Cuomo is more benevolently ruthless.’

‘Trump is selfishly ruthless for his own personal gain while Cuomo is more benevolently ruthless.’

“She continued: ‘It also helps that Cuomo knows intimately how to bend the different levers of government to his will. It's where you see having been at HUD, having been an attorney general of New York, having been a governor for 10 years — all that pays off. Ruthlessness is good, if it's for a good purpose. F.D.R. was ruthless.’

“I wrote admiringly about Cuomo's L.B.J.-style blend of the velvet glove and the brass knuckles when he did what Barack Obama did not deign to do in 2009 and clawed back millions from the rapacious financiers scarfing up bonuses while they were taking federal bailout money; when he pushed to legalize same-sex marriage in New York in 2011; and when he rammed through a gun control bill after the Sandy Hook children were slaughtered, surpassing Obama's efforts again.

“‘It took a terrible political toll on me, but it's still the best gun law in the nation,’ Cuomo says now.”

Andrew Cuomo is the very antithesis of Donald Trump and Trump is beside himself with jealousy. He knows when he is outclassed, and by someone who has his measure. And who knows how to fight with whatever it takes. Trump is a bully, but he is not a fighter. If there is ever a one-to-one contest between these two men, it will be epic.

We are now advised to wear masks, having previously been told that we should reserve them for medical staff. I am legally required to wear one if I venture outside although this is not policed. I read about police in Sydney imposing fines on people for reading in parks. I have seen nothing like that here. But there is nowhere to buy masks. Amazon advises there is a six-week waiting list. My brother in Sydney has come to the rescue. He air-expressed some on March 23. They were supposed to take 2 to 4 days, but they have not arrived.

Sunday 29 March

Cases: 32,308 am 33,474 pm. Deaths: 776

This morning my partner has a fever and a sore throat. We try not to panic. He is not short of breath, and he can smell and taste, but we can't not be alarmed. We know the number of cases is far higher than the official records show. It is almost impossible to get tested, even if you have symptoms. People are dying at home because EMS paramedics are instructed to transport only certain types of cases to over-crowded hospitals. Were we kidding ourselves to think we could escape? We discuss what we will do if he develops the tell-tale symptoms. Or if I do. We are not sure we know the right answer. Both of us have what are euphemistically referred to as "underlying symptoms" so we are not keen on entering the hospital system. But what else can we do? He sterilizes the thermometer and takes his temperature again. It is down, now, almost normal. A false alarm, or a warning? Is this what we are going to be living with from now on? For the first time, we feel fear seep into our apartment.

People are dying at home because EMS paramedics are instructed to transport only certain types of cases to over-crowded hospitals. Were we kidding ourselves to think we could escape?

I decide to give our landlady the contact details of our next-of-kin. Just in case. And I email my brother in Sydney who is the executor of both our wills. Let's schedule a WhatsApp chat next week, I suggest, so we can go through what you would need if anything happened to either of us here in New York.

My Twitter feed this morning contained a disturbing video of a body, apparently wrapped in a sheet (rather than a body bag) being loaded from a forklift into the back of a large refrigerated truck. The [video](#) was shot by a man named John Lee, who provides an emotional narration to the whole unnerving scene: 'They're putting the bodies in an 18-wheeler, y'all,' Lee says as he films the scene from his car outside the Brooklyn Hospital Center in the Fort Greene neighborhood. 'Please stay inside. This is for real.' The man's voice trembles as he intones, 'This is for real, this is for real', as if he can scarcely believe what he is seeing. It is indeed a confronting sight. FEMA has provided 85 of these refrigerated trucks for the city, each able to hold 100 bodies. The temporary morgue in a busy street outside a hospital is something we are having to accustom ourselves to. So, it seems, is seeing human bodies being shunted from hospitals on forklifts, like pieces of industrial equipment.

Of course, permission is needed to park these huge vehicles on busy residential streets. Various authorities, including the New York Fire Department, “New York’s Bravest” as they are known, need to sign off. Simon Ressler is a battalion chief at a fire station in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a heavily African American but rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn neighbourhood a few kms from where we live. He kept a [journal](#) of his 24 hour shift on 3 April that was published in *Pro Publica*. It is a remarkable piece of writing, an account of the banality of dealing with multiple home deaths each day by a force whose core business of fighting fires is not much in demand right now. Instead:

“Yesterday, I was tasked with approving hospital and nursing home requests to use the streets around their buildings to construct tents for overflow patients. Around 11 a.m., I received the first request of several to use the streets for refrigerated trailers to store the accumulating bodies. In the moment, I can be detached enough to do the work of looking at street dimensions, trailer sizes, locations of hydrants and entrances to buildings in order to make it work. It takes me five minutes to look at that information and email back, “FDNY has no objection.” And then a few more requests for more trailers. “FDNY has no objection.”

“Around 11 a.m., I received the first request of several to use the streets for refrigerated trailers to store the accumulating bodies”.

“Simple as that, we have approved the refrigerated storage on public streets of someone’s relative”.

The inevitable next step does not bear thinking about, but the Mayor’s office has confirmed to the media that prisoners from Rikers Island were digging mass graves in a government-owned cemetery on Hart Island which is located at the western end of Long Island Sound, near the Bronx. Although the Mayor claimed the graves were not “COVID specific”, despite the inmates doing the work being provided with PPE, a city 2008 pandemic preparedness report stated that the Hart Island cemetery would provide for “temporary mass internment method” that involves caskets in rows of 10, lined up head to foot to avoid stacking.

All this is happening very close to home. Brooklyn Hospital Center, a 20-minute walk away, is our closest hospital. Not that I have been inside. And, now of course, I hope that I never do. It is Brooklyn’s oldest hospital, established in 1845 and during the Civil War it tended to injured Union soldiers. Many of them were visited by Walt Whitman, a Brooklyn native and, for a time, editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, a renowned local newspaper that survives in online form today. Whitman reputedly ministered to the war-wounded with peaches – and with poetry. This year is the hospital’s 175th anniversary. One of the many ways of celebrating this milestone is a call for nominations to recognize 175 individuals and institutions that have “made a unique contribution to the depth, breadth, individuality and well-being of Brooklyn”. The individual most likely to top this list of honorees is Dr Anthony Fauci who was born in this hospital 80 years ago this December.

Governor Cuomo announced he was extending PAUSE for another two weeks, meaning non-essential workers should continue to stay home and large gatherings are banned until April 15.

Monday 30 March

Cases: 36,221 am. 38,087. Pm. Deaths: 914

I tried again this morning to schedule a delivery from Whole Foods. No delivery windows available, I am told. Check back again. I have been trying for a week now. I want some groceries, fresh fish and fruit and vegetables. I am not supposed to leave the house, so what am I supposed to do!

The USNS *Comfort* arrives in New York, welcomed by a cavalcade of tugs and fireboats shooting geysers of water high into the air. Dozens of New Yorkers disregard the social distancing rules and crowd along the Brooklyn Promenade to watch this former oil tanker, now a massive floating 1,000 bed hospital, steam in New York Harbor. The ship passing the Statue of Liberty is one of those sentimental images for the ages: Lady Liberty welcomes our medical saviours. Within a week, there will be only 20 patients on the ship, several of its crew members will have come down with the virus and the whole exercise has become decidedly messy. But that is still in the future.

The USNS Comfort passing the Statue of Liberty is one of those sentimental images for the ages: Lady Liberty welcomes our medical saviours.

For the past week the city has made meals available for students at 400 schools across the city, including PS 307 Daniel Hale Williams which is just around the corner from where we live. Three meals a day, which can all be picked up any time from 7.30 am – 1.30 pm. The lunch offering today is: “Assorted sandwiches, green bean salad, apple sauce, UH milk.” All menus are pork free, no fried food served, no artificial flavor, colors or sweeteners. This is New York after all. I am surprised there isn’t a calorie count and a trans-fats disclaimer. Within a week these meals will be available to every New Yorker who needs them, a recognition by the city that many of its citizens can no longer afford to buy food.

It is dark now but from our window the skyline of Manhattan provides a comforting familiarity. There’s the Chrysler Building, with its distinctive Art Deco crown, my favourite among the more ostentatious competitors for tallest-building status. But tonight there are changes. At the direction of Governor Cuomo, the 408-foot spire on top of One World Trade Centre, the building that replaced the Twin Towers, is lit up in red, white and blue. It will stay that way every night until the coronavirus is behind us. Not to be outdone, the Empire State Building tower is lit in flaming pulsating red, and rotating, with a strange-looking white box perched mid-way on tower that also pulsates at intervals. It is supposed to represent a siren, I learn, and is a tribute to the city’s first responders who are putting themselves in dire danger every time they answer a call. The intention is sound, but the effect is almost grotesque, more Halloween than homage. It would be more

powerful if they were to drop the white “siren”. I am evidently not the only person to think this, and within a couple of days the siren is gone. The rich red of the tower against the black sky is symbol enough.

Tuesday 31 March

Cases: 40,900 am 41,771 pm. 1096 deaths

The impacts continue to cascade. Life as we know it has changed. Perhaps forever.

Each day my inbox fills with emails from the many organisations whose lists I have found myself on because I have bought something or signed something. Today, I was informed by Stubhub, from whom I purchased tickets to a Broadway show, that ‘more than 23,000 events have been cancelled, postponed or rescheduled in the past three weeks and we expect to see many more. Effectively overnight, the live event industry has come to a standstill – for fans, sellers, teams, leagues, artists, venues and other supporting businesses.’

This morning the number of coronavirus cases world-wide had passed 800,000. The US continues to have the most cases, and the number is growing rapidly. This morning the count is 164,359 according to [Worldometers](#). Last night it was just below 150,000. And was it only last Friday that the US shot past China to lead the world in contagion, with 82,178 cases? The deaths per million are now starting to climb, with the US rate now 10. Last week it was 4.

Trump has shifted his rhetoric and now is saying 200,000 deaths would be a good result. Only a day earlier, that number had been 100,000. He, and we, will be very lucky if that is the final number. Or maybe the country’s luck will change, the projections will turn out to be wrong, and we will get through this with a much lower number. We don’t know. Or, terrible thought, he will figure out a way to stop the count, or to suppress the numbers. Maybe by ending testing. Anything is possible with this man.

All we know is that the President is scared and is like a little boy seeking to escape punishment or blame. Today we saw Trump’s untrammelled id as he ducked and weaved and intoned: It wasn’t me. It’s not my fault, I didn’t do it. I stopped the planes from China. I stopped them coming from Europe. I did everything possible. It’s not my fault.

Wednesday April 1

Cases: 44,915 am 45,707 pm Deaths: 1374

This morning my partner had his first tele-medicine consultation with his regular specialist. He is now a total convert. In the past these consultations involved about an hour on the subway to Mt Sinai on 103rd and Madison, and as long as 30 minutes in a crowded and often confronting waiting room. This way there is no travel, no waiting, prescriptions sent instantly and all follow-up referrals etc done on the spot. This is likely to be an enduring change, one that will be easier for doctors and patients, with in-person visits needed only when a physical exam is required. This damn thing has to have some benefits. I hope this will not be the only one.

Thursday April 2

Cases: 48,462 am 49,707 pm Deaths: 1562

One of the Twitterati said it best: we are going through a health crisis, an economic crisis and a leadership crisis. And we are ill-equipped to deal with each of them.

The health figures are ominous and continuing to grow. So are the economic indicators. Two weeks ago, 3.307 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits, the largest number in a single week by far - ever. A week later, the figure was 6.648 million. "What usually takes months or quarters to happen in a recession is happening in a matter of weeks," Michelle Meyer, chief US economist for Bank of America Merrill Lynch was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying. The speed and scale of the job losses is unprecedented, *the Times* points out. Until last week/month the worst week for unemployment was 695,000 in 1982. Now, a week later, a further 6.3 million joined the jobless. In just three weeks, more than 16 million Americans have lost their jobs. Or at least have been recorded as unemployed. Like the infection numbers, there is every reason to believe there is serious undercounting.

America's political leadership is in ruins and there is no chance of functioning democracy being restored by the Republicans. The Grand Old Party is in the business of denying democracy, by preventing people from voting and shifting legislative authority from the Congress to the courts. Whether a Biden-led Democratic Party can change this is an open question. The chances of a Cuomo, or another governor (such as California's Gavin Newsom)- led party doing it are probably greater but the obstacles to that happening are significant, perhaps insurmountable, and a subject for another piece of writing.

This will be his Katrina. It may well also be the country's Chernobyl.

But Donald Trump will never escape the consequences of his inability to handle the catastrophe wrought upon America by COVID-19. This will be his Katrina. It may well also be the country's Chernobyl. He who knows no history has probably never even read the Gettysburg Address and so will not know the words of Abraham Lincoln that so aptly summarise his presidency: "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here. But it will never forget what they did here".

Friday April 3

Cases: 52,948 am. 56,289 pm Deaths: 1867

In a few days, the number of deaths from COVID-19 in New York City are likely to eclipse the 2753 people who died in the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. That remains the most traumatic event ever visited on this city, and the one that most accurately encapsulates the stoicism, the resilience and the sentimentality that defines this most unique city. And you still see it, nineteen years later, in many and often unexpected ways. Walking past a Ukrainian Catholic Academy in the East Village last year, I noticed a bronze plaque listing the names of former

students who had died that day in the Twin Towers. Similar plaques can be found in unexpected places all over the city. Every fire station has a memorial to its members who lost their lives that day. And I remember the early footage of crowds along the West Side Highway cheering exhausted emergency workers leaving the carnage of the site, which is so like today's daily 7pm show of appreciation to nurses and doctors and other medical workers who are on the front line now.

The 9/11 Memorial and Museum is perhaps the most visited tourist destination in the city but, like other cultural institutions, it is temporarily closed. The outdoor reflecting pools are cordoned off from the public. I have been there several times and it is impossible not to be overcome by the grim simplicity of those thousands of names engraved on the granite blocks that surround the pools.

Since 2013, museum employees have placed a white rose on the inscribed name of each person killed in either the 2001 or 1993 terrorist attacks whose birthday it would have been that day. The Birthday Rose Program as it is called, continues while the memorial is closed. The visitor services staff who normally lay the roses have all been furloughed so the job has fallen to security and operations workers whose jobs are classified as essential. The flowers had always been donated by a TriBeCa florist which is now closed as a non-essential business but the owner, Michael Collarone, has been ordering flowers from a supplier in the Netherlands: "I want to show people that the world is not over," he says. He was in Lower Manhattan during both World Trade Center attacks and so knows something about endurance and reinvention. "We are going to get past this together," he says.

Post Script

Wednesday April 8

Cases; 77,967 am 80,204 pm. Deaths: 4260

It has been 36 days since I started this journal. Just over a month in which New York has lived through the unimaginable. And it is not over and may not be for a very long time. In his daily briefing today, Governor Cuomo told us that while the curve appeared to be flattening – that was the good news – there was also some "terrible" news: 779 of us had died in the past 24 hours, the highest rate for the state for any day so far. Death is the lagging indicator, he said, and the rate of deaths will continue to rise as the rate of hospitalisation declines because it reflects those people who were hospitalized a week or ten days ago.

He also warned that the rate of infections was going down because of what we were doing. If we stop doing it, if we stop staying home, stop social distancing, if we get lackadaisical, if we start thinking that because the numbers are getting better, the weather is getting nicer, and we are tired of the restrictions, then we could undo all the good work. We could see the infection rate rise again and be back to where we were.

The most difficult political job ahead is going to be managing the recovery – if indeed that is what we are seeing. Cuomo reminded us that in 1918, there was a second wave of the Spanish influenza

and it was more deadly than the first. Persuading people to stay home now is going to be more difficult than getting them to stay home in the first place. And while other governors might join the effort, understanding what is at stake, the clown in Washington will be urging people to come back to work. He believes that a surging economy is his most potent political weapon. He does not care what human cost is involved in achieving that.

Cuomo reminded us that in 1918, there was a second wave of the Spanish influenza and it was more deadly than the first.

Religion is essential to the political DNA of New York and this month each of the city's major religions will mark their holiest of days. Catholics, who are 33 per cent of NYC metro area residents, mark Good Friday and Easter Sunday this week. All Masses were cancelled by the Archdiocese of New York on March 14 for the foreseeable future so observance will be online. Most other major religions in the city followed suit, with Muslims, who are 3 per cent of the city's residents, and who begin the month of Ramadan on April 23, banning Jumua'h (Friday prayer) in early March. All other religious gatherings were included in the March 27 city order enforcing new social distancing regulations, and outlawing gatherings of more than 10 people.

At the end of his daily briefing today, Governor Cuomo wishes everyone a happy Passover. "The Jewish community has had a long and difficult year, experiencing violence and anti-Semitism, even in New York", he said. All of us can learn from the message of Passover, he added: we remember the past, we learn from the present and we teach these lessons to the new generation.

Not all of New York's Jews, who make up 8 per cent of the population, are Orthodox, let alone ultra-Orthodox, but it is this group that has been attracting headlines. The coronavirus has devastated Hasidic communities with neighbourhoods like Williamsburg, Borough Park, Midwood and Crown Heights having among the highest rates of infection in the city. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency, a New York based news service on all matters Jewish, has attributed the spread of the virus to mass Purim religious holiday celebrations held in Brooklyn on March 9 and 10. And although community members say they've abided by social distancing guidelines and have called out those who don't, there continue to be large public gatherings.

At least three massive funerals were held in Brooklyn streets on Sunday night. Hundreds of mourners, very few of them wearing masks, turned out in Hewes Street in the heart of Williamsburg for the funeral of 80-year-old Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh Meislish who had died of COVID-19. Police cruisers tried to break up the crowds, using their sirens and PAs warning people to disperse, but they did not arrest anyone.

"Now is not the time for large religious gatherings," Governor Cuomo said on Monday, after stressing what a good friend he was to the Orthodox community. "We have already paid this price." He was referring to the New Rochelle outbreak, which is now contained. Jewish leaders say they are being scapegoated by the media attention paid to these funerals and weddings.

Especially when prominent rabbis have issued guidance forbidding any gatherings for the day before Passover.

"It's hard enough that so many of our rabbis, leaders, neighbors, friends, and family are sick, dying, or dead," wrote Laura E. Atkins, a Jewish Telegraphic Agency editor, on Twitter. "We've gutted our communal way of life because we value saving lives above everything."

Let's not forget that Trump had wanted the churches filled with "beautiful" people on Easter Sunday, who would then all make their way back to their workplaces the next day. That's not going to happen, especially in New York where, as the flattening curve attests, observance of social distancing has been high. But in other parts of the country, these religious holidays may lead to spikes of infection and a resurgence of cases – and deaths. Not all Catholics are happy about being told they can't attend Easter Mass, and many Jews are already flouting the rules on crowds. In Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Kansas, religious gatherings are exempt from social distancing laws.

Before this week is over, the US will have 500,000 confirmed cases and 20,000 deaths. New York State will continue for at least another couple of weeks to be the most heavily hit. New York City will most likely hit 100,000 cases and the death toll will pass 5000. That is the number of people who have died in hospitals. The actual COVID-19 toll is likely to be considerably, as much as 70 per cent, higher, the Mayor has acknowledged. Over the last two weeks, FDNY officials said 2,192 New York City residents died in their homes, compared to 453 during the same time period last year. The majority of these home deaths are being attributed to the virus. Once the city starts including these home deaths in their daily tallies, as they have promised to, there will be a big, demoralising spike.

When I began writing this journal, on March 4, there were 2 cases, and no one had yet died. We could scarcely have foreseen how rapidly we would descend into such devastation.

When I began writing this journal, on March 4, there were 2 cases, and no one had yet died. We could scarcely have foreseen how rapidly we would descend into such devastation. Or that, one month later, we would be so uncertain about what our future might look like.

There are now field hospitals all around the city, in posh hotels, at the Billie Jean King Tennis Centre in Flushing, Queens, in Central Park and, just this week, in the massive Cathedral of St John the Divine, the world's largest Gothic cathedral, on Manhattan's Upper West Side. "Traditionally, in earlier centuries, cathedrals were always used in this way, like during the plague," said Rt Rev. Clifton Daniel III, the dean of the Cathedral. "So this is not outside the experience of being a cathedral, it is just new to us".

Indeed, there is something right about victims of a pandemic, what was once referred to as "the plague", something we associate with medieval times, being tended to in this lofty medieval space. It is a space of soaring wonder, even for non-believers like myself, of contemplation of our finite

being and celebration that we do so much with what we have. It is a place of political sanctuary and a place that celebrates the lives of the city's greatest artists, be they poets, novelists, actors or musicians. I was last there in November when, along with 3,000 other New Yorkers, I attended the memorial for Toni Morrison. I am doing my best to avoid this wretched virus, but if it does come for me, I can think of no other place in New York where I would rather spend my final days.

Final Word

Thursday April 30

I predicted on April 8, when I finished this Journal, that the numbers of infections in New York City would pass 100,000 and the death toll would be at least 5000. I was too optimistic.

After just eight weeks, these are the vital statistics of the city, the state and the country:

<i>New York City</i>	Cases: 162, 212	Deaths: 17,866
<i>New York State</i>	Cases: 310,839	Deaths: 23,780
<i>United States</i>	Cases: 1,095,023	Deaths: 63,856

And we must add the 30,307,000 people who have filed for unemployment benefits in the past six weeks.

All of these figures are likely to be understated.

Economists are saying that the unemployment figure is likely to understate actual unemployment by as much as 50 per cent since many people are ineligible for unemployment benefits while many others are deterred from filing by the complexity of the process. The system has so many cracks in it, you wonder how it holds together. The coronavirus is exposing deep structural flaws in many aspects of American life.

New York City now includes a daily count of 'probable' as well as 'confirmed' COVID-19 deaths. Yesterday the total of 'confirmed' deaths was 12,571 while another 5295 were listed as 'probable'. These are people whose death certificate states COVID-19 as the probable cause but this was not confirmed by a test. New York State does not include 'probable' in its tally which accounts for the discrepancy between state and city statistics.

But even including the 'probables' may not give us the full picture. A [data analysis](#) by the *New York Times* reveals 20,900 more deaths in NYC than this time last year, and less than 17,000 of these are accounted for by the official COVID-19 count. This leaves a discrepancy of some 4200. Many of these will be people who died of other causes but could not obtain hospital care that might have saved their lives because of the pressures on ERs from the coronavirus. Should these people also be counted as casualties of the pandemic?

If, as Governor Cuomo predicted on March 24, New York is the 'canary in the coal mine', the calamity that has been New York for the past six weeks might just be starting in other states. Yesterday 2201 died nationwide and that figure is rising daily. Yet in so many parts of America

the pressure is on to ignore or deny that what happened in New York and to get back to “normal” as soon as possible.

It emerged this week that the state of Florida has asked its Medical Examiners not to release COVID-19 death figures. They don't want their death count to be public. You have to wonder whether this is also happening in other states, such as Texas, whose governors have favoured restarting their economies by relaxing, or even ending, isolation and social distancing policies, ahead of public health considerations.

It emerged this week that the state of Florida has asked its Medical Examiners not to release COVID-19 death figures.

Elsewhere, some sectors of the population are pushing back against the sensible policies of their governors. Today armed militia – yes, you read that right: men carrying assault weapons – occupied the statehouse in Lansing, Michigan to pressure “that woman”, as President Trump calls Governor Gretchen Whitmer, not to extend the current state-of-emergency. Michigan recorded 41,379 cases today, an increase of 980 over the previous day, and its death tally rose by 119 to 3789.

Governor Whitmer showed the kind of courage we have not seen in the White House in three and half years and stared down the thugs carrying AK-47s in the people's house. She extended the state of emergency for a further month. Perhaps she had been advised that on March 31, New York City had 41,771 cases and 1096 deaths. Michigan already has three times as many deaths as New York had on a similar number of cases one month ago.

When I began this Journal on March 4 New York City had two cases of COVID-19 and no one had yet died. The speed with which the virus overran the city and the state has shocked us all, and we are still reeling from the toll which has seemingly reached its plateau and is now on descent, but which is still shockingly high. Yesterday ‘only’ 306 people died in NYS, about half the number of a week ago.

The USNS *Comfort* left New York harbour this afternoon. The massive hospital ship with its 1000 bed capacity spent one month here and treated just 186 patients. All the hoopla around its arrival proved to be embarrassingly over-hyped. Initially intended to cater to non-COVID cases that New York's hospitals could not accommodate, it was quickly converted to a 500-bed coronavirus hospital because that was seemingly where the need was. We don't know the truth about why it was not used. Maybe we never will.

The flattening of the curve meant that New York's expanded hospital capacity was never fully utilized. The field hospital at St John the Divine was never completed. The flattening of the curve was the official reason but the truth is that the Church [beat a retreat](#) when it discovered that Samaritan's Glove, the organization contracted by Mt Sinai Hospital to run the field hospital, was

associated with the evangelist Franklin Graham (son of Billy) and included anti-Muslim and anti-LGBTI sentiments in its mission statement. No way was the inclusive and outward-looking St John the Divine going to work with bigots like these.

The pandemic has forced us to ask questions about the lives we lead and the places in which we find ourselves. New York's uniqueness as a city derives from people and their interactions with other people: the bravura of the Broadway musical, the accidental street theatre, the musical performances on the subway, the unabashed sentimentality of New Yorkers about every single thing in their city. These are all gone, at least for now, so what is left? What is New York?

It turns out that New York is the people who have been deemed "essential" and who are, by and large, the low paid and the vulnerable. They are the subway conductors, the nurses and other health workers (including janitors and morgue attendants), the sanitation workers, the security guards, the grocery store clerks, the Amazon truck drivers, the bike-riding food deliverers. They are most often African-American or Hispanic. They have kept the city going while the rest of us stay safe at home. And they are the ones who are, overwhelmingly, dying from this disease.

They have kept the city going while the rest of us stay safe at home. And they are the ones who are, overwhelmingly, dying from this disease.

This is confirmed by the [official death toll](#) which shows the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens each suffering more than 30 per cent of the deaths, the Bronx 21 per cent, while Manhattan has only 13 per cent – and Staten Island just 4.7 per cent. The map of [confirmed infections by zip code](#) exposes even more sharply the ethnic and racial impact: neighbourhoods with high concentrations of black and brown people having the highest level of infection. A close analysis of deaths by zip code, which has not yet been done, is likely to confirm that it is the city's poorest people who have paid the highest price of this Pandemic.

The coronavirus has revealed many unpleasant truths about our city and ourselves. For all the opulence of the second Gilded Age that is seen as defining 21st century Manhattan, the city in fact rests on the shoulders and the labour of poor people who live across the river, long subway journeys from the places where they work.

The closing down of the city has exposed a hunger crisis in America's wealthiest city. The mayor has deployed 11,500 taxi and Uber drivers to deliver food each day to the many people who cannot make it to a school to pick up free meals. The subways, which have been left virtually empty by a 93 per cent drop in riders, have become dormitories for hundreds of homeless people too frightened by the high infection rates in shelters to seek refuge there. But a newspaper "expose" this week, complete with confronting photographs of what is perhaps the "real" New York, has forced Governor Cuomo to declare the situation "disgusting".

For the first time in its history the subway will be closed overnight. Homeless people will be moved to accommodation, the Governor promises, and the subway cars and stations will be thoroughly cleaned. Another first.

There has been a terrible inequity to the way this Pandemic has impacted on America and, especially, on New York City. It has laid bare the gulfs that have always been there, and that have been disguised or excused by the romantic image New York has of itself as tough and brutal but as offering opportunities for reinvention and success. “If you can make it here...” as the city’s unofficial anthem goes. It is an image that still lures immigrants, from across the country and around the world, by the hundreds of thousands. And the image persists even as the opportunities fade like mirages. Hope and optimism are hard currency in this city. Whether they are coronavirus-proof, we will have to wait and see.

Note: some events mentioned in this journal may not have occurred on the day on which they are recorded; to clarify those that have, I have always used the word “today”.

Ends

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